

## CHAPTER 6

# *From Confession to Exposure* *Transitions in 1940s Anticommunist Literature*

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On August 23, 1939, the Soviet regime signed the pact with Nazi Germany that ripped apart the Popular Front alliance of communists and left-wing progressives that had dominated radical politics in the second half of the 1930s. The betrayal was especially painful for the radical American artists who had believed themselves to be working on the “cultural front,” and their tools of trade ensured that they were well placed to give cogent expression to their feelings.<sup>1</sup> The result was a literature of alienation in the early 1940s that formed a precursor to the larger shift toward anticommunism in American culture in the Cold War.

Since ex-communists and disappointed fellow travelers moved across the political spectrum over the coming decade, their influence was felt in left-wing, liberal, and conservative circles alike. Politicians and public figures of all stripes in the Cold War deployed arguments that had been initially articulated by these disappointed radicals. Nevertheless, the initial literary products of what Alfred Kazin called the “Great Disillusionment” were written at a time when anticommunism had not yet become an all-consuming cultural force in American life.<sup>2</sup> The United States and Soviet Union fought as allies between 1941 and 1945, and while there was little love for communism in the American mainstream, Nazism and Japanese militarism were seen as greater dangers to world peace. New Deal liberals highlighted the work that the Red Army was doing to hold back the Nazis. Former US ambassador to the Soviet Union Joseph E. Davies’s memoir, *Mission to Moscow* (1941), which valorized Stalin and whitewashed the Moscow Trials, sold more than 700,000 copies and was made into a Hollywood movie that, running alongside films such as *The North Star* (1943) and *Song of Russia* (1944), offered a far more positive view of the Soviet world than could be found after the war.<sup>3</sup>

Anticommunist writers from the left in the early 1940s plowed their own furrows, often unaware of their vanguard status. Shaken by controversies invisible to the mainstream, the 1940s literature of disillusionment was

incestuous and internecine. It was shaped by styles and philosophies honed in the 1930s debates over art as a political weapon, and there were noticeable continuities between the radical literature of the 1930s and the anticommunist writing that emerged to challenge it. Many placed the representation of disillusionment at the center of their writing, and the individuality of the associated anger, grief, loss of faith, and struggle for meaning gave even the weaker works an emotional range typically lacking in later anticommunist literature. As Philip Rahv wrote, "The old anti-Stalinism of the independent left had the true pathos and conviction of a minority fighting under its own banner for its own ends." By the end of the 1940s, however, anticommunism had become instead "almost a professional stance . . . in apparent obliviousness of the fact that in the past few years anti-Stalinism has virtually become the official creed of our entire society."<sup>4</sup> In short, a literature of disillusionment briefly emerged from the ashes of the Popular Front before being swept away by a culture of fear.

Hidden behind the lurid glow of Cold War neon, the distinctive features of this material, not least as a bridge between two eras, have often been overlooked. It repays study, both for its own sake and to add nuance to the larger history of early anticommunism. In Joel Kovel's influential formulation, scholars of the subject have been encouraged to distinguish between "*anti-Communism* as a more or less objective dislike of Communism" and *anticommunism* as "the reigning ideology of the West." To Kovel, anti-Communism was "that part of the picture which is primarily about Communism," whereas "anticommunism is that part which is primarily about us," especially our projected anxieties and neuroses.<sup>5</sup> However, this dichotomy can slip into the a priori belief that conservative forms of anti-communism were essentially less rational than more progressive variants, a problem also common to Richard Hofstadter's concept of the "paranoid style in American history."<sup>6</sup> Framing the history of anticommunism in these terms can shut down more forensic analysis of conservative politics and thinking, as Alan Brinkley has pointed out, in favor of reductive diagnoses of social neurosis as the primary, or even sole, determinant of conservative anticommunism.<sup>7</sup>

Studying the anticommunist literature of the 1940s suggests an approach in which Kovel's formula can be modified in order to downplay the emphasis on objectivity and irrationality in favor of a focus on conflicting modes of literary representation. As Alan M. Wald notes, many of the most important figures in the literary world of the 1940s rejected "Communism" (with an uppercase "C"), opposing the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) and its connections to the Stalinist world apparatus, but remained committed

to the ideology and values of “communism” (lowercase “c”) or radical culture more generally.<sup>8</sup> Their efforts to denounce Stalin were part and parcel of a desire to rescue communism from his influence, and much labor went into wrestling apart these two elements. As such, anti-Stalinist writers and literary critics responded directly to the broadly realist literary styles that had been promoted by fellow-traveling radicals in the 1930s, seeking to move them in new directions rather than abandoning them altogether. By drawing on confessional and autobiographical themes that echoed the American jeremiad tradition, these figures sought to show how the international communist movement was failing on its own terms. Such confessional anti-Communism was not “objective,” nor was it impersonal in the way Kovel’s framework implies. Nevertheless, it did retain an underlying concern with literary realism that connected it to the communist culture it was now opposing.

This contrasts with the anticommunist literature of exposure that emerged in the later 1940s, which took its cues primarily from mass consumer fiction rather than the cultural front. Less concerned with mimesis, this literature represented communism in abstract and stylized ways, using tropes common to the contemporary romance, adventure, crime, and detective fiction genres of which they formed a part. Its power and appeal lay not in any fidelity to the lived experience of American communism, but in depicting a coherent, deterministic world in which the crimes of communism were given existential moral significance by connecting them to long-standing literary conventions. Rather than condemning Stalin’s crimes, one is asked to hate the communist for his deformities and deviance. Unlike the confessional tradition, in which the dominant themes of the writing were doubt, conflict, and internal transformation, the literature of exposure focused on betrayal, discovery, and vengeance. This changed focus was not merely of literary significance. Over time, these images fed into the political debate over communism’s nature and place in American life. By the McCarthy years, they had reshaped the public image of communism so much that it had little relationship to the organizations and people who participated in the communist movement during the previous generation, but instead came to represent a vast, amorphous, and in many ways timeless moral struggle.

### **The Literature of Disillusionment**

It is surprising how few substantive literary challenges to communism could be found in the United States before the late 1930s. After her brief

sojourn in Bolshevik Russia, Emma Goldman had written a manuscript, "My Two Years in Russia," a somewhat botched version of which was published in the United States in 1923, followed by an additional, corrective volume a year later.<sup>9</sup> Max Eastman had been another early enthusiast for Bolshevism who quickly lost faith. He published several books on the Soviet Union and revolutionary Marxism in the interwar years, concluding in *The End of Socialism in Russia* (1937) that "the Soviet Union bids fair to be as reactionary as any country which has emerged from feudalism."<sup>10</sup> Russian émigré Ayn Rand's novel of life and love in post-revolution Russia, *We the Living*, was released in 1936 – over the objections of Granville Hicks, who was at that time an associate editor at Macmillan and a CPUSA member – but it sold only in the low thousands due to a combination of unenthusiastic marketing, an uninterested public, and its indifferent quality.<sup>11</sup> Among a growing crop of work produced by disaffected European radicals, André Gide's *Return from the USSR* was translated into English and released by Knopf in 1937, and Ignazio Silone's *Bread and Wine* was published in New York by Harper the same year – but George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*, released in Britain in 1938, was not distributed by an American publisher until 1952.

The first significant bloom of literary anti-Stalinism emerged in the second half of the 1930s, when the New York intellectuals affiliated with Philip Rahv and William Phillips's *Partisan Review* broke with the CPUSA over the Moscow Trials, during which a series of "Old Bolsheviks" had been arrested, prosecuted on trumped-up charges, and, in many cases, executed in order to consolidate Stalin's absolute control over the Soviet machinery of state. Initially a party organ, *Partisan Review* was relaunched in 1937 and quickly became the principal intellectual home for critics of Stalin on the left. The journal was notable in connecting political indictments of Stalinism with questions of culture and aesthetics.<sup>12</sup> Arguing that party leaders had persistently subordinated artistic decisions to the political line, Rahv claimed that the communist movement was less interested in books than in mobilizing radical authors as political celebrities: "defining *art* as a weapon becomes in practice the many-sided opportunism of converting the *artist* into one."<sup>13</sup>

Rahv suggested that literary criticism, if done right, could instead be used to interrogate politics. Because legal hearings were "performances, plays, dramatic fictions," the Moscow Trials could be analyzed like literary works – as both political crimes and "trials of the mind and of the human spirit." According to Rahv, an assessment of their "reality or unreality as literature ought to affect our judgment" of their ethical significance. Their

falsehood was revealed in the absence of the dramatic tension normally generated during a trial from the contingent behavior of free agents responding to accusation. Instead of dramatically rich occasions, the Moscow Trials were flat and empty. Characters became caricatures: “banal, mechanized, automatic . . . Manifestly no imaginative artist could have composed such plays; only a policeman could write so badly.” Rahv suggested that the Soviets had moved back to the world of “predramas, magical rites . . . In the Soviet Union the tragic is still in its embryonic phase; the state is barren, and to cure itself it practices exorcisms and conjures up spirits.”<sup>14</sup>

Although rooted in the political crises of the late 1930s, the literary implications of disillusionment were worked out in the 1940s when a much larger body of anticommunist writing emerged. It was as if meltwater moving invisibly within a glacier gave way to the calving of an ice sheet. Many of the first texts to make an impression were either produced in Europe, such as Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon* (1940, published in the United States in 1941); focused on European politics, as with Ernest Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), which offered, in André Marty, a critical representation of the role of the communist apparatchik during the Spanish Civil War; or were by Europeans who had taken refuge in America, as with Walter Krivitsky’s *In Stalin’s Secret Service* (1939), Jan Valtin’s *Out of the Night* (1940), and Freda Uteley’s *The Dream We Lost* (1940).<sup>15</sup> Krivitsky (real name Samuel Ginsburg) and Valtin (real name Richard Krebs) had both been communist covert agents, and their personal accounts offered the sense of adventure that Cold War spy novels would emulate. Uteley, an English radical, moved to the United States in 1939 after fleeing the Soviet Union when her Russian husband was sent to the gulag, and her memoirs offered similar dramatic attractions.

Koestler’s work, in contrast, drew on his experience of confinement during the Spanish Civil War to conjure a vivid and claustrophobic impression of solitary confinement and interrogation, and was more introspective. As Rahv had pointed out, the drama of the Moscow Trials was not to be found in the courtroom. Koestler focused on what came before, asking how his protagonist, Rubashov, an Old Bolshevik caught up the Moscow Trials, could come to terms with his impending sacrifice on the altar of Stalinism. In so doing, Koestler was able to highlight the absurd ends to which an ideological framework of thought could drift, a theme that connected his work to the contemporaneous critiques of Stalinist ideology offered by the American philosophers John Dewey and Sidney Hook.<sup>16</sup> Although he compared communism to religion, notably absent, Koestler

suggested, was the Christian notion of mercy that Rubashov repeatedly invoked through his vivid memory of the *Pieta*.

Other European imports, including Victor Kravchenko's *I Chose Freedom* (1946), Vladimir Nabokov's *Bend Sinister* (1947), and George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), would follow later in the decade. However, the United States generated a substantial indigenous corpus of anticommunist literature. The vast majority came from either disillusioned members of the CPUSA or proximate fellow travelers and had been distinctively shaped by the experience of communism in American life. Even the most shattering event of the period, the Hitler-Stalin pact, featured as much as evidence of the opportunism of the Communist Party leadership in America, which quickly pivoted behind the Moscow line, as for its larger geopolitical significance.

Although Eugene Lyons's synoptic work, *The Red Decade* (1941), was influential, most works echoed Koestler by focusing on individual experience as the site of dramatic tension. Many were personal narratives, such as William Henry Chamberlin's *The Confessions of an Individualist* (1940), Benjamin Gitlow's *I Confess: The Truth about American Communism* (1940), Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1945), originally titled *Black Confession*, and contributions from both Wright and Louis Fischer in Richard Crossman's Euro-American collection, *The God that Failed: A Confession* (1949). Lightly fictionalized representations of personal alienation were also presented in John Dos Passos, *The Adventures of a Young Man* (1939), Granville Hicks, *Only One Storm* (1942), Joseph Freeman, *Never Call Retreat* (1943), James T. Farrell, *The Road Between* (1949), and Edward Newhouse, *The Hollow of the Wave* (1949). Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and Chester Himes's *Lonely Crusade* (1947) focused on the mistreatment of African Americans by Communist Party activists. Their experiences and writing would influence Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), begun in 1945 when Ellison was still angry over the quietist line on race the party had adopted during the war.<sup>17</sup>

As the repetitious "confessions" of the autobiographical titles make clear, these texts also followed Koestler in linking the abandonment of communism to the loss of religious faith. Although quickly reduced to cliché, this theme proved resilient, not least because it gave the written account a sacred status. As part of the process of conversion, the testimonial was not only a record of disenchantment but also an act of penitence before redemption. This tied the literature of disillusionment to the "conversion narrative" tradition stretching back to the Puritan literature of the First Great Awakening and the accounts of antebellum ex-slaves. Whittaker Chambers's

*Witness* (1952) offered the most accomplished example. Framed by ideas taken from Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard (whose *The Concept of Dread* was, not coincidentally, first published in English in 1944), Chambers's account of conversion and redemption through testimony becomes a self-pitying jeremiad that connects the decision to stand as witness against communism to Christ's sacrifice on the cross before an indifferent and brutalized population.<sup>18</sup>

As well as justifying these books' publication, the focus on individual experience reinforced the argument that communism in its Stalinist form was an essentially anti-humanistic movement. The early 1940s literature of disillusionment turned this into a central theme. In Freeman's *Never Call Retreat*, for instance, the communist poet, Kurt, is forced by the party leadership to withdraw a poem that does not suit the political line; this paralleled Freeman's experience when the CPUSA asked him to sabotage the release of *An American Testament* (1936).<sup>19</sup> Richard Wright offered a typically double-edged interpretation: he presented his early enthusiasm for communism as stemming from a naïve narcissism, believing he could educate the communist world about the working people whose virtues they extolled. His disillusionment came as a humbling realization that his fellow party activists didn't even have an interest in *him*. "My comrades had known me, my family, my friends; they, God knows, had known my aching poverty," Wright wrote. "But they had never been able to conquer their fear of the individual way in which I acted and lived, an individuality which life had seared into my bones."<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Newhouse satirized his experience working for the communist-affiliated New Age publishing house in *The Hollow of the Wave*, in which pro-communist staff drive the Holland Press into the ground by publishing agit-prop and passing over books of merit.<sup>21</sup> In one scene, an executive director, Jack Kincaid, argues passionately for publishing Gide, unaware that he had split from the party. Later, having discovered the truth, he returns to denounce the French author as a "dangerous character, a homosexual, a Fascist and every other kind of jerk," unruffled by his rapid shift in attitude.<sup>22</sup>

Narratives of conversion and alienation tended to imply that escaping communism's influence allowed for the expression or rediscovery of identity. The successes and failures of these texts as literature thus depended on the author's ability to represent persuasively the subjective experience of conversion. This had implications not only for the political content of 1940s anticommunist literature but also for technique, as writers sought to move away from the models of 1930s literature either through innovation or by returning to older American forms. At times, the desire to break

with the 1930s could end up as mannerist rather than iconoclastic, as with Newhouse's clunky efforts to reprise Fitzgerald in *The Hollow of the Wave*. In other cases, as with Bellow's *Dangling Man* (1944), authors were able to engage with the problem of alienation and sketch out a new kind of commitment to American life and culture.<sup>23</sup>

Trilling's anticommunist "novel of ideas," *The Middle of the Journey*, sought to reassert the bourgeois novel itself as a tool to resist totalitarianism by promoting the sensibility of freedom. To Trilling, the essential naiveté of the liberal fellow traveler, and of Enlightenment ideology more generally, stemmed from the refusal to admit to the inevitability of death, the subject toward which his novel is directed. To the progressive mind, Trilling asks, "Was there not a sense in which death might be called reactionary?"<sup>24</sup> By meditating on his mortality, the novel's protagonist, John Laskell, comes to recognize that mature adulthood is "at once responsible and conditioned," the middle of a journey between birth and death represented in Laskell's convalescence and rural recuperation after a near-fatal fever.<sup>25</sup> By contrast, the liberal Nancy Croom is pathologically resistant to thinking about mortality. This, Trilling suggests, is deeply connected to her politics. In agreeing to act as a letter drop for the communist agent, Gifford Maxim, Nancy believes herself to be better attuned to reality than is her airy husband, but events show her to be a fantasist, unwilling to face up to what is really being done in the name of progress. A central irony is that her primary assessment of value is made according to her judgment of realism. She considers the unschooled but essentially moral Emily Caldwell to be "unreal" in her inarticulate aspirations toward beauty, whereas Emily's violent husband Duck is judged to be interesting and therefore "real," his sins excused on sociological grounds. The arrival of Maxim, a fictionalized version of Whittaker Chambers, who has recently broken from the communist underground, exposes Nancy's supposed worldliness as delusion in a manner that, befitting his surname, is both economical in phrasing and as ruthless as a machine gun.<sup>26</sup> He immediately spots Duck's "criminal personality." He tells the gathered company that a shared radical acquaintance died in Spain not as a hero, but by stepping on a rusty nail. He makes it clear that his former comrades would prefer him dead. In each case he deflates the romance of radicalism. "So far as *The Middle of the Journey* had a polemical end in view, it was that of bringing to light the clandestine negation of the political life which Stalinist Communism had fostered among the intellectuals of the West," Trilling wrote in 1975. "In such confrontation of this tendency as my novel proposed to make, Chambers [Maxim] came

to its aid with what he knew, from his experience, of the reality which lay behind the luminous words of the great promise."<sup>27</sup>

### From Confession to Exposure

Communist and fellow traveling writers of the 1930s never followed the party line in the slavish manner that their critics argued.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, to those who believed, as Rahv, that the work of the cultural front had become indistinguishable from propaganda, the antidote was a form of postcommunist writing that restored the primacy of aesthetic considerations. Few writers offered as elegant a response to this call as Trilling, however. Indeed, the occasionally ham-fisted political messages to be found in 1930s literature recurred in the literature of disillusionment: Hicks, Newhouse, and Farrell were all guilty of overdetermined plotting and political didacticism. Anticommunist writers of the 1940s thus shared more with the cultural front than their overt attacks on literary communism might suggest.

Later in the decade, during the emerging Cold War the literature of anti-communism transformed beyond recognition. As fear reshaped American popular culture, an image emerged of a worldwide communist conspiracy whose diabolical features were born of racial, gendered, and class anxieties rather than the actualities of communism. Anticommunist tropes proliferated, yet lost their nuance and dramatic complexity, moving away from any kind of realism. As Stephen Whitfield notes, the Cold War witnessed the politicization of American culture in ways that led to the political exclusion of many on the left. The new era saw the "philistine inspection of artistic works" not only for their overt content but also "for the *politique des auteurs*. Censors endorsed the boycott of films that they had not seen; vigilantes favored the removal from library shelves of books that they had not read."<sup>29</sup> Writing that offered an uncomplicated characterization of the enemy was, by contrast, received with enthusiasm. As a result, the communist enemy was increasingly slotted into mass-market genre fiction, replacing older enemies such as gangsters and foreigners. The wartime assault on Nazism also contributed to new visions of communism as "totalitarianism."<sup>30</sup> While the study of anticommunist texts in the 1940s began as intellectual history, by the Cold War years it increasingly became a subject for historians of culture.<sup>31</sup>

Although her peculiar vision stands alone, Ayn Rand was undoubtedly a crucial progenitor of this shift in register. Compared to her earlier effort, *We the Living*, which was at least in some ways reflective of life in Soviet

Russia, the hugely successful *The Fountainhead* (1943) presented a model of anticommunist literature that was set in America but uninterested in the cultural front, or indeed in the real life of American communists at all. Rand's ideas were shaped by Hollywood screenplays, pulp romance novels, and libertarian theory, not the history of the Communist Party. As mass genre literature came to the fore, other texts, such as Willa Gibbs's *The Tender Men* (1948), Neil Boardman's *The Long Home* (1948), Pat Frank's *An Affair of State* (1948), Lavinia Davis's *Come Be My Love* (1949), Catherine Ridgway McCarthy's *Definition of Love* (1949), and Virginia Peckham's *Proud Angela* (1949), presented images of communism that were both sweeping and conventional. In *Definition of Love*, for instance, a novel for young women, the heroine, Connie Trumbull, has to choose between two men: the likable poet and university instructor Ted Sackett or the exciting but dangerous Dick Morey. This classic dilemma is barely altered by the fact that Ted is a former party member, whereas Dick – jealous, rage-filled, and dissolute – is an unrepentant communist.

Communism thus becomes a marker of character rather than a subject for interrogation. Even many writers who had close knowledge of interwar communism and sympathy for individual communists began to offer less overtly representative and biographical images of communism, molding their writing to the genre expectations of the burgeoning culture industry. Waldo Frank, who had been the fellow-traveling chairman of the CP-dominated League of American Writers, wrote *The Invaders* (1948), an early example of post-apocalyptic literature in which an atomic explosion in New York brings together a schematically constructed cast of survivors, including a physically and emotionally damaged communist veteran.<sup>32</sup> Rex Stout, an anticommunist liberal, ACLU member, and former contributor to *The New Masses*, inserted communist villains into his pulp detective novel, *The Second Confession* (1949). In *Limbo Tower* (1949), William Lindsay Gresham, who had been a loyalist medic during the Spanish Civil War, placed naïve but principled revolutionary radicals alongside other residents of a tuberculosis ward that served both as a somewhat plodding metaphor for humanity and as a backdrop for a doctor-nurse romance plot. Even supposedly autobiographical works revealed a lowered interest in mimetic reproduction of the communist experience. The contrast between Ben Gitlow's measured autobiography of 1940 and his melodramatic and unreliable retreatment of 1948, *The Whole of Their Lives*, reveals how far the expectations of anticommunist writing had shifted. Books such as anticommunist witness Louis Budenz's *This Is My Story* (1947) were increasingly imitative of the crime genre, rather than the post-communist confessional.

Indeed, in Herbert Philbrick's *I Led Three Lives* (1952) there is no faith to lose: the hero simply assumes a disguise in order to infiltrate the communist underworld, and what little tension there is stems from his desire to avoid being caught. The reorientations such texts depict are only ever skin deep.

The experience of communism in the 1930s encouraged disillusioned writers to fictionalize their experiences, but not entirely to abandon the realist models of the 1930s. By the end of the 1940s, however, genre expectations had taken over. Indeed, they were conditioning understandings of American communism in politics as well as literature. This blurring of lines could be seen most clearly in the case of Matt Cvetic, an army reject hired by the FBI during the war to infiltrate the CPUSA in Pittsburgh. Cvetic used his comparatively uneventful experiences as a low-level FBI informant to secure an invitation as a friendly witness before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). With this badge of honor secured, Cvetic offered up his dubious personal narrative as the basis for a radio series, *I Was A Communist for the FBI*, that ran between 1952 and 1954 and led to a film of the same name. Despite claiming fidelity to truth, the series bore only a faintest relationship to Cvetic's actual experience. Instead, the hero sought week by week to avoid being caught by suspicious communist conspirators in various contrived scenarios, while feeding crucial evidence of Bolshevik criminality to his FBI employers.

Those who were able to most effectively align message and medium in the postwar years opted for genres that better suited stark and simple themes, as with Orwell's turn to fable. More often, though, as mass genre conventions took over, predictable literary techniques became common. In novels such as *The Invaders* (1948) or Cornelia Jessey's *Teach the Angry Spirit* (1948), the psychological damage associated with political radicalism is represented by branding embittered radicals with physical injuries, reprising centuries-old tired associations between disfigurement, disability, and corruption. Even Trilling played with this hackneyed trope in *The Middle of the Journey* (1947), though he, at least, turned it into a sophisticated device of anthropomorphic fallacy. In the scene when Maxim comes to seek Laskell's help, having recently split from the party, the "great dreadful scar" on Gifford Maxim's face, "said to have been made by a glancing blow from the steel shoe of a policeman's horse," seems to take on a will of its own. With Laskell's perception uprooted by his slow recovery from fever, he imagines Maxim's scar offering "its sardonic comment on everything that was false." Later, when Laskell is on the road to recovery and Maxim has been literally stripped after his departure from the party, Laskell observes his old friend

sitting in ill-fitting, borrowed clothes and notes that the scar, though still visible, “no longer had its old meaning.”<sup>33</sup>

The introspective focus on conversion and confession thus gave way to a concern with identification and exposure. Detectives assumed a forensic role in identifying the hidden communist, psychiatrists diagnosed their maladies, and the subjective experience of radicalism became irrelevant. The concern with exposure contrasts dramatically with the treatment of covert communists in earlier texts, such as Hicks’s *Only One Storm*, in which the decision to hide party membership is less a sign of deceit than an affectation. When Christina Kittredge asks an attendee at a cocktail party if she and her husband are party members, her question is condemned for being tactless rather than predatory, and she feels naïve for having been unable to read the signs. “Oh, for God’s sake,” the cynical know-it-all, Ralph Baxter, declares, “if anyone here doesn’t know you two are in the party, he ought to be told the facts of life.”<sup>34</sup> This could hardly be further from the idea of the “deep cover” Soviet agent that, in the wake of the Alger Hiss case, became a central element of the allegations made by proto-McCarthyites at the end of the 1940s. Indeed, Wallace Burgin, the most dedicated communist in Hicks’s novel, is presented sympathetically, and it is he, rather than the limp fellow travelers, who breaks from the party in the wake of the invasion of Finland. While self-dramatizing and messianic, the communist Gifford Maxim in *The Middle of the Journey* also emerges as a more honorable character than the fellow-traveling progressives, the Crooms. In the literature of disillusionment it was the cynic and the careerist who were presented most negatively; by the Cold War it was the fanatic, the fantasist.

Whatever one’s view of its ethics, exposure was the very opposite of conversion. It was external and coercive rather than driven by voluntary, internal motivations. The shift from confession to exposure, from subjective characterization to external identification, marks out the personal, often angst-ridden testimonials of the earlier 1940s from the genre literature more common to the Cold War years.

The rise of highly stylized genre representations of the communist “enemy within” is often linked to the radical right in the early Cold War years and the challenge to more liberal strains of anticommunism. This was not always true. If the sensibility of anticommunist writing in the late 1940s was increasingly kitsch, it did not inevitably include McCarthyite political messages. The theme of exposure could also be used to emphasize the importance of expertise and calm judgment when it came to combating the Red Menace, for instance.

Rex Stout, whose Nero Wolfe series ran to dozens of novels and short stories between the 1930s and 1970s and was repurposed in radio plays, films, and television series, offered a neat argument on the dangers of amateur sleuthing when his detective hero was asked to uncover a hidden communist in his 1950 book, *The Second Confession*. Wolfe is hired by the wealthy chairman of the board of the Continental Mines Corporation, James U. Sperling, to expose a radical lawyer, Louis Rony, as a secret communist. Sperling hopes to smear Rony, who is having a relationship with his rebellious daughter, Gwenn. Wolfe agrees to take the case, but insists that he will only go where the evidence leads and will not participate in a stitch-up. When Rony is murdered, it becomes clear that another character in Sperling's circle is the real hidden communist. Wolfe compels two Communist Party leaders to identify the villain, who turns out to be Sperling's trusted right-hand man, Webster Kane. Thus exposing communists is shown to be a complex, technical task that should be reserved for experts like Wolfe, while Sperling is "disqualified by mental astigmatism."<sup>35</sup> Ironically, Kane had already offered a confession to Rony's murder earlier in the book, but it was a false one extracted by Sperling in the hope of covering for his son's suspected involvement in the crime, and had been disregarded by Wolfe as an obvious fabrication. The ultimate revelation of Kane as a murderer and communist was the "second confession" of the title, demonstrating the importance of getting not just the right man but also getting him for the right reasons.

Standard detective-novel red herrings planted throughout the book thus become implicit warnings against leaping to conclusions. Meanwhile, as payment for his services, Wolfe insists that Sperling use his influence as a corporate sponsor to bring about the dismissal of a rabble-rousing McCarthyite television commentator, Paul Emerson, a sour, antisocial, pill-popper who uses his media bully pulpit to attack radical professors, world federalists, and, latterly, Nero Wolfe. At first Sperling resists, pointing out that Emerson has high ratings. "So had Goebbels," Wolfe retorts. "And Mussolini."<sup>36</sup> While the novel confirms what had become the conventional view of communist malevolence, it insists that the only proper response is expert investigation based on rigorous evaluation of evidence, leading to principled exposure, not witch hunts.

Nevertheless, this methodical vision was, like the anticommunist confessional, a muted undertone in comparison to the vibrant iconography of the most successful anticommunist fictions of the early Cold War. Wolfe's stance could hardly be further from the one taken by Mickey Spillane's antihero detective, Mike Hammer, who more than any other fictional

character represented the surging anticommunist id of the McCarthy years. Hammer's brutal adventures propelled the sale of more than seventeen million books between 1947 and 1953.<sup>37</sup> Although the first book of the series was published in 1947, Hammer did not run into his first communists until *One Lonely Night*, published in 1951, which sold an extraordinary three million copies. In this book, Hammer's distinctive form of justice was served through cartoonish violence, sadistic punishment of a radical temptress, infiltration of a communist network and murder of its head, and the wholesale fabrication of evidence. Hammer's joyously reactionary excesses represented a contemptuous rejection of Nero Wolfe's delicate liberal sensibilities, and the extraordinary success of Spillane's novels testified to the Cold War enthusiasm for a rawer form of vigilante anticommunist justice than Stout's principled hero could offer: a fantasy of punishment that would bear fruit in books and films of the frontier West, in Clint Eastwood's *Dirty Harry* movies, and so on.<sup>38</sup>

John Kerrigan reminds us that the detective genre is essentially a form of revenge tragedy, in which the hero hunts for clues within a landscape charged with moral significance in order to expose a crime, just as Hamlet seeks to prove his father's murder. As with the Prince of Denmark's "antic disposition," the detective assumes the disguise of folly or eccentricity to evade the quarry's suspicions. By patiently gathering clues and manipulating those around him through dramatic performances (whether the Mousetrap or bringing the suspects into the drawing room), the hero exploits the tragic weaknesses of the villain (the sense of guilt, clues left at the scene of the crime) to force the criminal into self-exposure.<sup>39</sup>

Reading early Cold War anticommunist literature as revenge tragedy offers an additional explanation for what Richard Hofstadter called the "paranoid style" of the radical right-wing vision in the early Cold War years. The detective novel's orientation toward clues, performance, and exposure meshed neatly with early Cold War investigatory culture. Meanwhile, the tragic model of a coherent universe in which traces of criminal conduct deterministically point the way to a misdeed of existential moral significance was the very essence of early Cold War conspiracy theories. When John Birch Society co-founder Robert Welch suggested that President Dwight D. Eisenhower was a communist, there was no room for historical explanations based on accident, incompetence, or unintended consequence – only for a vast, orchestrated and covert plot, an unprecedented act of treason that could be uncovered only through the careful efforts of the righteous.

Hofstadter pointed out that the image of the enemy evoked through the paranoid style was “on many counts the projection of the self; both the ideal and the unacceptable aspects of the self are attributed to him.”<sup>40</sup> As such, the punishment of the communist in early Cold War fictions often revealed displaced fantasies of self-repression. Mike Hammer’s violent retribution in *One Lonely Night* is presented as a fitting response to the particular crimes of the enemies he fights, just as the vaccine mirrors the disease it immunizes against, yet it reflected at a deeper level the anxieties and neuroses of the Cold War mainstream. The Bolshevik *femme fatale* represents not communism but the threat of uncontrolled female power and is stripped and whipped, disciplined through sexualized violence. The communist ringleader is condemned for his idealism, his refusal to conform to the existing social order; his name, Oscar Dreamer, points out that his sin is of being a fantasist. As punishment he finds himself at the receiving end of Hammer’s brutal pseudo-realism. “You were a Commie, Oscar, because you were batty,” Hammer tells his enemy, as he chokes him to death.<sup>41</sup>

One can go too far in attributing change neatly to a particular decade. Traces of many of the major anticommunist themes in literature and public rhetoric could be found before the 1940s. Nor did the decade bring to a permanent end the radical literary tradition of the Depression years that had such influence on the anticommunist writing of the 1940s. Alan Wald reminds us that two prominent CP-affiliated publishers, International Publishers and New Century, were still selling two million books and pamphlets annually after the war, while a range of radical authors, many subsequently forgotten, were producing trenchant and sometimes prophetic critiques of the homogenized mass culture of the American landscape well into the 1950s.<sup>42</sup>

Nevertheless, the language and literature of anticommunism had been substantially transformed in the 1940s. The extension of genre representations of communist criminality into the legislative and executive branch investigations was in many ways an inversion of the way the disaffection of communist writers was represented earlier in the decade. To Rahv, the Moscow Trials were a step back from both drama and the law, a ritual that was deterministic and devoid of humanity, and the response had to be a search for truth through literature. By contrast, the investigations conducted in the McCarthy era sought to make reality conform to a model of communism driven by genre fiction and fantasies of revenge. The communist became a criminal charged with existential moral significance. Guilt was revealed through staged performances of exposure.

Punishment through social exclusion symbolically inverted supposed efforts to gain secret access to the corridors of power. Where reality and fiction began and ended had become impossible to tell.

## NOTES

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